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INFO RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 8469
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 05 TAIPEI 001093

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/23/2023

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SUBJECT: PRESIDENT MA YING-JEU: AN INTRODUCTORY PROFILE

Classified By: AIT Director Stephen M. Young,
Reasons: 1.4 (b/d)

11. (C) Summary: President Ma Ying-jeou entered office on May 20 with high expectations that he would improve cross-Straits relations, strengthen economic performance, and help calm Taiwan's charged partisan political atmosphere. Ma's clean image, moderate political style, and reputation for integrity won him strong public support during the campaign. Coming from a background in the KMT's mainlander elite, Ma made a special effort to reach out to the ethnic Taiwanese majority, especially in southern Taiwan. In his first two months, Ma's polling numbers have slipped as a result of economic problems and early missteps by the president and new government (septel). The one bright spot for Ma has been the improvement in cross-Straits relations, though some question how much this will benefit Taiwan economically. Critics of the president attribute Ma's current difficulties to what they say is his longstanding problem of indecisive and ineffective leadership, especially when facing crises. Ma's supporters hope that criticisms will gradually abate as the new administration gets past early growing pains and the international economic situation improves. End Summary.

12. (C) The Kuomintang's top political star, Ma Ying-jeou was inaugurated president on May 20 after having scored a decisive 17 percentage point victory in the March 22 presidential election. Ma's strong showing followed similar impressive victories in two elections for Taipei mayor (1998 and 2002) and in the KMT's intra-party election for party chairman in 2005. His ability to win elections by wide margins is especially notable given his lack of grassroots political experience, standoffish attitude toward local political dealmakers, and soft leadership style. Some of the factors that have contributed to his string of victories include a clean-cut image, reputation for integrity, and moderate personality.

The KMT's Comeback

13. (C) In addition to achieving personal political success, Ma has played a key role in the KMT's strong comeback since 12005. After suffering a series of splits beginning in the 1990s, the KMT was highly demoralized and in disarray following successive presidential losses in 2000 and 2004. On the ropes, the KMT rebounded under the seemingly unbeatable Ma, whose appeal extended beyond the party faithful to those who had broken in disillusionment with

previous party leaders.

Ma's Background

14. (C) Ma, who comes from a KMT mainlander elite family, studied graduate law in the U.S. under a party scholarship. Because Ma was raised and educated in a wholly KMT environment, he is a "nationalist" who identifies with the Republic of China (ROC), not Taiwan, according to KMT Honorary Chairman Lien Chan. Although Ma has a "greater China" mentality, he remains staunchly anti-Communist. Lien added that Ma's deep commitment to freedom, democracy, and human rights is a product of his legal studies in the U.S.

15. (C) Upon return from the U.S. to Taiwan in 1981, Ma began his career near the top, taking a position in the presidential office as Chiang Ching-kuo's English language secretary and interpreter. Ma subsequently rose through a series of high-level party and government appointments, only entering electoral politics in 1998, when he ran for Taipei mayor. A KMT star from the start, Ma never faced the challenge, or had the opportunity, to develop the political horse-trading skills that most Taiwan politicians rely on to get ahead. Instead, Ma invented his own distinctive "direct sales" political style, in which he works crowds and audiences, capitalizing on public and heavy media interest in him as a star. What he lacks in rustic folk-appeal, Ma makes up with an urbane sophistication and moderation that attracts many in the middle class in today's Taiwan.

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By the Book

16. (C) Lien Chan, who is often critical of Ma Ying-jeou in private conversation, suggested that Ma's problem-solving style is often legalistic and inflexible -- if you wish to know how Ma will act, he quipped, "just look in the rule book." A stickler for rules, Ma has stressed that, in contrast to the previous DPP administration, he will strictly follow the constitution, which assigns to the president the management of foreign, cross-Straits, and defense policy. In response to past calls by President Chen and others for constitutional reform, Ma always insisted that the problem was lack of implementation rather than flaws in the constitution. Ma originally believed the appointed premier, not the elected president, should manage domestic policy, and that the president should stay on the "second line." He was forced to adjust this low-key approach to the presidency after being challenged by powerful legislators from both sides of the aisle, pursuing their own interests, coupled with criticism from the media and public for not shouldering his responsibilities as their elected leader. Now, Ma is playing a more prominent public role in responding to crises, such as recent flooding in central and southern Taiwan.

17. (C) Ma's focus on rule-of-law values came to the fore during his tenure as Minister of Justice (1993-96), when he earned a reputation as a corruption fighter who went after KMT as well as non-KMT offenders. Given his strong anti-corruption credentials, Ma was hurt personally and politically by criminal charges that he had misused Taipei mayoral special funds in 2007, although he was subsequently acquitted.

Questions about Leadership Capability

18. (C) Ma's detractors argue he is more media-constructed image than real substance, claiming that he is an indecisive and weak leader who avoids confronting difficult problems and panics in the face of crisis. In their view, whenever possible, Ma lets his subordinates take the heat over controversial issues. Also, they say, Ma is inconsistent,

too often shifting his stance in response to political pressure, for example, during the 2006 campaign to oust President Chen. Critics also question Ma's ability to control his own party, especially legislators, who have not always gone along with his wishes. Ma has also had difficulties dealing with some other KMT leaders, including Honorary Chairman Lien Chan and Legislative Yuan (LY) Speaker Wang Jin-pyng. Ma describes his political style as "taciturn boldness." Although he argues that he honed his leadership skills during eight years as mayor of Taipei, critics cast doubt on his record, pointing to his perceived failure to deal effectively with SARS and other crises and problems in the city.

¶9. (C) KMT Changhua County Chairman Hsu Hsu-po predicted Ma will not be capable of restraining KMT legislators. Ma will not dictate to the KMT LY caucus because he wants to promote a more "democratic" image for the party. Perhaps more important, added Hsu, Ma does not have the "street fighter" mentality or will to "fight dirty" against those who would oppose him on party reform or other issues. Former Taipei Deputy Mayor Sam Wu (KMT) agreed that Ma is trying to replace the autocratic style of previous KMT leaders with a more "democratic" form of leadership. At the same time, Wu observed, Ma is leery of taking strong positions or issuing commands for fear that he will be contradicted or ignored by others within the party.

A Reformer

¶10. (C) The idealistic Ma promoted KMT reform when he was party chairman (2005-2007), achieving some results, including cutting the bloated staff and moving out of the ostentatious headquarters building to a more modest location. But others have noted he failed in his two years as party chairman to truly reorganize and rejuvenate the KMT, a lapse that is

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hurting him now as the party apparatus is not particularly loyal to him. Rather than casting a wide net as many politicians do, Ma tends to identify and associate mostly with individuals who share a similar background and outlook. Keeping his distance from traditional power brokers in the party, he has won support from a narrow group of like-minded scholars and officials who are also well educated, favor reform, and have an international outlook. Ma constitutes one side of the famous "Ma-Li-Chiang" triangle, a close group which also includes Taoyuan County Magistrate Chu "Li"-lun and Taichung Mayor Jason Hu Chih-"Chiang." Recently, however, Ma and Hu have had differences over Hu's frustrated hope to be named Presidential Office secretary general and his recent trip to the PRC, which Ma did not support.

¶11. (C) As president, Ma has been promoting a more frugal governing style through personal example. One of his first acts as president was to shift from suit to open collar shirt, turning up the air conditioning thermostat to promote energy conservation in response to rising fuel prices. High officials have also swapped their large official limousines for smaller vehicles to reduce emissions, and Ma has avoided using the large "Air Force One" jet for his official travel. He has announced plans to fly by commercial plane to the U.S. west coast during an upcoming August transit en route to Latin America, an idea that has attracted mixed commentary here, some suggesting he is lowering the dignity of the presidency. Ma also cut costs for the inauguration, refrained from costly renovations of his office and residence, and has moved to serve inexpensive box lunches on some official occasions.

A Conciliator

¶12. (C) Ma is clearly more comfortable with rational discussion of issues than the emotional, partisan acrimony

that often characterizes Taiwan politics. Ma told AIT on several occasions before the presidential election that personal experience had taught him it was better to share power with adversaries than to try to exclude them. He also promised, if elected, to encourage the KMT to share power with the now-weakened DPP. In an effort to reduce partisanship, Ma has reached beyond the pan-Blue camp, for example, seeking support from former President Lee Teng-hui and recruiting Lee-protege Lai Shin-yuan to chair the Mainland Affairs Council. The Lai appointment appears to have been intended to reassure pan-Green critics that their concerns will not be totally ignored in the cross-Strait policy process. But it has been sharply criticized by the deep Blue. Ma also nominated former DPP legislator Shen Fu-hsiung to serve as vice president of the watchdog Control Yuan, but Shen's nomination was rejected by the LY. One commentator has observed that, in contrast to President Chen's firebrand personality, Ma's more gentle character promises to reduce the bitter partisanship that has divided Taiwan in recent years.

Ma Knows Best?

¶13. (C) Former Taipei Deputy Mayor Wu said most of Ma's first line advisers, himself included, try to avoid contradicting Ma unless absolutely necessary, because persuading Ma to change his mind is quite difficult, requiring long argument and hard facts. This would explain Ma's sullen reaction to the U.S. refusal to approve a trip to America as president-elect this spring. Wu also remarked that Ma prefers to meet with his advisers in a one-on-one "hub-and-spokes" fashion rather than in groups. In that way, Wu explained, Ma can control the flow of information and weigh independently the views and recommendations of different advisers.

Personal Information and Career Path

¶14. (C) Ma Ying-jeou was born in Hong Kong in 1950, and his parents, who originally came from Xiangtan in Hunan province, moved permanently to Taiwan when Ma was one year old. Ma's

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father was a loyal party official who groomed his only son for public service, giving him a strong grounding in Chinese culture and KMT values. Despite living in a traditional Taipei district, in keeping with most mainland-born KMT, Ma did not learn Taiwanese as a youth. He attended Taiwan's top high school, studied law at the top university and then continued his legal studies at New York University and Harvard University as recipient of a KMT scholarship. A leader in pro-KMT student activities in the U.S., Ma edited a newsletter, wrote reports and articles rebutting the views of Taiwan independence supporters, and was a leader in the student movement asserting Taiwan sovereignty over the disputed Diaoyutai (Senkaku) Islands, also claimed by Japan. He has been accused of reporting on other students during these years, an accusation he and his supporters vehemently reject.

¶15. (C) Returning to Taiwan in 1981, Ma was appointed deputy bureau director in the Presidential Office, where he took over responsibility, previously shouldered by James Soong, as President Chiang Ching-kuo's English language secretary and interpreter. After Chiang Ching-kuo's death in 1988, President Lee Teng-hui continued in the role of senior mentor to the talented and ambitious Ma. Rising steadily in a series of senior appointments, Ma achieved political prominence as Deputy in the Mainland Affairs Council (1991-93) where he cut his teeth on cross-Strait issues during a period of great promise. As Justice Minister (1993-96), Ma enhanced his reputation as an impartial corruption fighter who went after KMT as well as non-KMT offenders. Pressured to resign, Ma launched into electoral

politics in 1998, defeating the highly popular incumbent DPP mayor of Taipei, Chen Shui-bian. Ma's victory over a popular opponent immediately catapulted him into political stardom. Ma easily won reelection in 2002, making a point of campaigning in, and winning, the two majority Taiwanese districts he had not carried four years earlier. In 2005, Ma campaigned on a reform platform and handily beat LY speaker and political pro Wang Jin-pyng in the intra-party election for KMT chairman.

¶16. (C) An only son, Ma has four sisters. Ma met his wife Christine Chow (Mei-ching), who turned out to be a high school classmate of one of his sisters, when they studied in the same master's program at New York University. Chow, who eschews the limelight, has won a following as a modest and independent career woman. During a rare campaign appearance in support of Ma, Chow said, "Whatever weak points husbands have, he has them all." At the same event, Chow pushed Ma's head down as the two took a bow together, a scene shown repeatedly on television. Chow has said Ma "tends to neglect the needs of those around him" and also lacks romanticism. Reportedly, Chow calls the shots at home and controls the family's finances. As first lady, Chow has set aside her business career and turned to public interest activities after briefly considering becoming the first working "first lady" in Taiwan history. Ma's eldest daughter, Lesley Ma (Wei-chung), was born in the U.S., graduated from Harvard, and now works in New York City, while younger daughter Kelly Ma (Yuan-chung) is an undergraduate at Brown University.

¶17. (C) Ma has been described as a workaholic who sleeps only five hours per night and has not vacationed with his family in years. A fitness enthusiast, Ma is often seen jogging, swimming, or biking on television. He is well-known for his generally detached temperament and bland personality, and he is more open only with his closest long-term friends. Ma likes to keep a low profile, generally distancing himself from wealthy socialites, sycophants, and journalists. He places little importance on material possessions and maintains a relatively frugal lifestyle, eating boxed lunches and even, reportedly, sewing his own buttons.

Appendix: Curriculum Vitae

¶18. (U) Present Position: President of the Republic of China (Taiwan), May 2008-present.

¶19. (U) Previous Positions: KMT Chairman, July 2005-February

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2007; Taipei City Mayor, December 1998-2006; Professor of Law, National Chengchi University, 1998; Minister without Portfolio, Executive Yuan (EY), 1996-1997; Minister of Justice, 1993-1996; KMT At-large National Assembly Member, 1992-1996; Vice Chairman, Mainland Affairs Council, EY, 1991-1993; Chairman, Research, Development and Evaluation Commission, EY, 1988-1991; Executive Secretary, Mainland Affairs Council, 1988-1990; English Interpreter for President Lee Teng-hui, 1988; Deputy Secretary General, KMT Central Committee, 1984-1988; Deputy Director, First Bureau, Presidential Office, 1981-1988; English Interpreter for President Chiang Ching-kuo, 1981-1988; Professor of Law, National Chengchi University, 1981-1993; Associate, Cole & Deitz Law Office, New York, U.S., 1981; Research Consultant, University of Maryland Law School, 1981; Consultant, Law Office, First National Bank of Boston, 1980-1981; Interpreter, American Society of International Law; Consultant, Wilmer and Pickering Law Office, Washington, DC.

¶20. (U) Political Affiliation: Chairman, KMT, July 2005-February 2007; Member, KMT Central Standing Committee, 1999-2005.

¶21. (U) Education: LL.B., Law College, National Taiwan University, Taipei, 1972; LL.M., New York University, 1976;

J.S.D., Harvard University, 1981.

¶22. (U) DPOB: July 13, 1950, Kowloon, Hong Kong. Family: married to Chow Mei-ching; 2 children. Language Proficiencies: English, fluent (S-4); Taiwanese.
YOUNG